

EXCERPT



Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest From Sabbath to Sabbatical and Back Again

October 11, 2022 | \$25, 256 pages, hardcover | 978-1-5140-0263-6

In our frenzied culture, the possibility of rest feels elusive. Most know they need rest, but they might be surprised to find a deep resistance within themselves to slow down. The journey to sabbath-keeping is slow and gradual, and it is a journey that we need to travel as a church community. Sharing her own story of practicing sabbath for the past twenty years, Ruth Haley Barton offers her own wisdom of the rhythms of sabbath. Sabbath is more than a practice—it is an invitation to rest and replenishment with God.

Resting Upon God's Care and Mercy

If you ask me, sabbath is one of God's greatest gifts to us in our humanity—right up there with salvation through Christ. It is a gift that is both beautiful *and* functional, luxurious *and* essential all at the same time. And every time you open it, it feels brand new.

For me, sabbath-keeping has been a progression that started with cultivating a daily practice of solitude and silence as a place of rest in God, where I began to experience *for the first time* what it felt like to cease striving, give in to the limits of being human, and rest myself upon God's care and mercy. What an amazing experience this was for one who had worked so hard on so many things—including my spirituality—for so long. In the process I became more aware of my driven-ness and how deeply entrenched it was. I had to really *own* my driven-ness and say, "Yes, this is what's true about me." Sitting uncomfortably with that admission for a while, I could finally get honest about just how tired I really was—deep in my bones—and it was this awareness that prepared me to hear, really hear, God's invitation to set aside my work and my ceaseless striving in order to rest myself in God one day a week. These shorter, daily periods of resting in God in solitude gave me a taste of what could be.

As my capacity to let go and cease striving increased through a daily practice of solitude and silence, God drew me back to the biblical practice of a whole day set apart for rest, worship, and delight—a practice I had rejected but now God was returning to me in the most winsome way. Now I wanted it badly enough that I was willing to do pretty much anything to get it and then protect it.

Falling in Love Gradually

I believe the Jewish folks had it right; the only way to even begin taking steps toward a sabbath practice is to let yourself fall in love with this day so that you long for it as you would long for a loved one. For me, it was important not to make sabbath-keeping a weighty exercise but to fall in love gradually—to explore it with delight—as though God and I were learning how to spend time together in a new and special way.

Falling in love with the sabbath does not mean it is always easy or that I have never given in to the temptation "to pursue our own affairs on God's holy day," but twenty years later, I can say that I am a passionate lover of the sabbath who would not be standing in the middle of my life and calling today if it wasn't for this essential rhythm. As the journey has continued to unfold, God has invited me into longer periods of retreat⁶ and then finally into embracing sabbatical as part and parcel of my sabbath life in leadership.

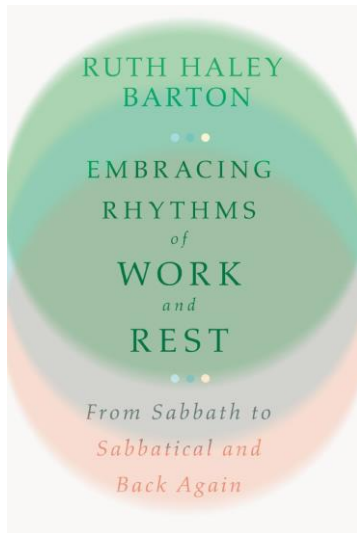


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"In the face of the demographic shifts and national divisions happening in our world today, many leaders are often frustrated, fatigued, and despondent, desperately searching for a different way forward. *Embracing Rhythms of Work and Rest* is an invitation for leaders to take the next step into sabbath living that gives them life and longevity in ministry. It is also a prophetic wake-up call, leading us away from individualism into the communal practice of sabbath keeping as it was always meant to be." —**Brenda Salter McNeil**, author of *Becoming Brave* and *Roadmap to Reconciliation 2.0: Moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness and Justice*

Eventually I discovered that this special quality of time could be brought to what we might call sabbath pauses—which was really encouraging! Taking a moment to rest in God between one activity and the next, pausing before entering a room or a new situation to orient oneself to God and invite God's presence, creating space for a moment for quiet gratitude (rather than just a perfunctory prayer) before a meal, deciding not to scroll through the apps on my phone while waiting for an appointment but to just cease and be, using time in the car to be still and allow God to replenish me rather than turning on music or podcasts or making phone calls . . . all of these are simple means of introducing a sabbath way of being into other days of the week as well. Practicing sabbath as a quality of time experienced on a set-apart day acquainted me with a way of being that is now possible anytime, anywhere.

Just Say Yes

Taken together, this sabbath progression has kept me navigating within sane rhythms of work, rest, and renewal for long-term sustainability. It all starts with longing and love as we allow ourselves to get in touch with the desire that stirs deep within our own souls—desire for a way of life that works. A way of life in which we are not so tired all the time. A way of life that recognizes, accepts, and even honors the limits of our humanity, fostering contentment through delighting in God's truest gifts. When we are brave enough to be in touch with this stirring of the soul, God meets us *right there* in the middle of our desire with the revelation of this amazing gift that is fitted perfectly for us. Then we simply say yes to a God who knows us so well and loves us so much that he has provided us with such a good gift—if we can just arrange our lives to receive it.

The encouragement to "simply say yes" is not to imply that sabbath-keeping is easy; it is not. In fact, sabbath-keeping has only gotten more complicated as our culture has moved away from distinguishing any one day as different from the rest. In addition, the ubiquitous nature of technology has added layers of challenge and difficulty to the prospect of unplugging and resting from constant connection stimulation. What I mean by "simply say yes" is that the first thing that has to happen is for there to be real yes, deep down inside. A yes to our need, a yes to our desperation, a yes to God's invitation and the rightness of it—before we even know how we're going to make it real in our own lives. This is the very definition of faith—to say yes when we have no idea how it's all going to work out, but we know it's what we need to do. It is that deep, interior "yes" that will carry us into and through all the knotty issues sabbath raises until we emerge with a sabbath practice that works for us. There really is no shortcut, no other way, except through the doorway of desire, accompanied by faith that God is calling us and will show us the way. In this process, we learn for ourselves that yes, indeed, the Sabbath is the most precious present humankind has received from the treasure house of God.

—Adapted from Chapter One, "A Wake-Up Call"



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Ruth Haley Barton is founding president of the Transforming Center, a spiritual formation ministry to pastors and Christian leaders. A trained spiritual director, teacher, and retreat leader, she is the author of multiple books, including *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*, *Sacred Rhythms*, and *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*.

Avoiding Dangerous Levels of Exhaustion

What is the greater challenge when it comes to work and rest?

Ruth Haley Barton: Work is not better than rest, and rest is not better than work. The beauty is in the rhythm. God worked and rested, and the beauty really is in the back and forth between the two. Because our culture over-values performance and achievement, for many of us learning to prioritize rest and delight (not mere escapism) is the greater challenge.

What role has a sabbath life had in “keeping you in the game” as a leader?

Ruth: Embracing a sabbath life, keeping a sabbath, and developing sabbatical practices, more than anything, has “kept me in the game” as a leader—continually preventing me from succumbing to dangerous levels of exhaustion. I am passionate about seeing leaders and communities embrace sabbath practicing together for long-term sustainability.

Sabbath keeping is a God-ordained rhythm intended for the good of all God’s people, not just a commandment given to one group of people in a particular place and time. There is a communal nature to this practice, and it needs to be led by senior pastors and leaders in their communities versus expecting people to stumble around and figure it out on their own.

Why is a sabbath life so important to pursue?

Ruth: Sabbath is a gift from God for us today. God never “took back” the fourth commandment; Jesus practiced sabbath and reframed it a bit, but he did not do away with it. In addition to ceasing and resting from our work one day a week, sabbath helps us resist the forces of culture and find liberation from our bondage to culture and driven-ness.

Sabbath is not primarily a privatized discipline; it is, and always has been, a practice to be experienced in community, led by leaders who are practicing sane rhythms of work and rest themselves. It is about ceasing our relentless consumerism and delighting in God’s good gifts that cannot be bought and sold. For leaders specifically, sabbatical time (working six years and then being granted an extended period of rest during the seventh) is a critical, God-ordained rhythm to be embraced, resourced, and planned for in sabbath communities, following a biblical viewpoint on the practice, not viewing it as merely exchanging one kind of work for another.



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